

# Addressing Changing Times Teaching Disability Etiquette to PETE Students

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*Teaching an inclusive class requires knowing how to properly  
speak to and treat persons with a disability.*

Over the past 10 years, there has been a change in the behavior and demeanor of many college students (Bru, Stephens, & Torsheim, 2002). This behavioral change includes a rise in poor social skills, such as inappropriate actions and comments in social situations. Various explanations have been offered for this change, including a shift in society, different norms of acceptability, evolving institutions, and the influence of mass media (Heinemann, 1996). In view of these changes in behavior, it is increasingly important for educators to incorporate proper behaviors and professional etiquette in the educational curricula of physical education teacher education (PETE) students. This is especially true when preparing teacher candidates to teach students with disabilities.

The topic of disability etiquette has been extensively addressed in adapted physical education journals and textbooks (Davis & Rizzo, 1991; Rizzo, Broadhead, & Kowalski, 1997; Sherrill & Yilla, 2004). Consequently, it is familiar to adapted physical educators who regularly interact with people with disabilities and who are aware of the issues that affect people with disabilities. This article is therefore intended to offer practical suggestions to PETE students who may not be as experienced in this area and to increase awareness of opportunities to infuse etiquette in various situations across the PETE curriculum. The purpose of this article is twofold: (1) to offer proper written and conversational etiquette for PETE students to use when interacting with people with disabilities and (2) to improve the overall behavior of PETE students by teaching etiquette in PETE programs and examining the attitudes and labels that may influence their behaviors toward people with disabilities.

## Why Teach Disability Etiquette?

The need for teaching proper etiquette has evolved from the educational reform movement in the United States and from federal legislation regarding students with disabilities. The educational reform movement was instituted to ensure that all students are being taught by qualified, competent professionals (No Child Left Behind Act of 2001). Competency includes behaving and reacting in an acceptable manner.

Because of the implementation of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975—which mandated free and appropriate education for students with disabilities in the least restrictive environment consistent with safety—and the reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in 1999, which emphasized the importance of educating students with disabilities in the general education environment (Auxter, Pyfer, & Huettig, 2005), physical educators now have an increased number of students with disabilities in their general physical education classes (DePauw & Karp, 1994; Lieberman & Houston-Wilson, 2002; Reber, Marshak, & Glor-Scheib, 1995; Rizzo et al., 1997). This has made it even more important for physical educators to learn how to adequately meet the needs of students with disabilities to ensure successful inclusion. Guaranteeing the successful inclusion and enjoyment of all students involves demonstrating proper attitudes toward students with disabilities.

The National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE), an accrediting body for educator licensure programs preparing professionals for teaching at the elementary and secondary levels, has developed and implemented standards for teacher education programs and the preparation of candidates to ensure quality teachers (NCATE, 2007). According to standard one (“Candidate Knowledge, Skills, and Professional Dispositions”), “Candidates preparing to work in schools as teachers or other professionals know and demonstrate the content knowledge, pedagogical content knowledge and skills...and professional dispositions necessary to help all students learn” (NCATE, 2007, p. 4). Specifically, element 1g (“Professional Dispositions for All Candidates”) includes the following “target performance”:

Candidates work with students, families, colleagues, and communities in ways that reflect the professional dispositions expected of professional educators as delineated in professional, state, and institutional standards. Candidates recognize when their own professional dispositions may need to be adjusted and are able to develop plans to do so. (NCATE, 2007, p. 9)

Teacher candidates are expected to behave in a professional and ethical manner when teaching students or interacting and communicating with colleagues and the community. To meet these needs, licensure programs have had to implement strategies to help students to develop acceptable dispositions both in and out of the classroom. Teaching acceptable dispositions involves teaching proper etiquette—including disability etiquette—in all situations.

## Attitudes, Behaviors, and Labels

It is important to be aware of what we, as educators and PETE students, think of and feel towards individuals with disabilities as well as how we act on those thoughts and feelings. This involves gaining a better understanding of specific disabilities, becoming more reflective regarding attitudes, and learning how to behave in an acceptable manner toward people with disabilities. Teaching proper etiquette involves

demonstrating and teaching acceptable norms. Disability etiquette is an avenue to “facilitating a change in attitudes and behaviors” towards people with disabilities in order to create positive and accepting environments (Governor’s Committee on Employment of People with Disabilities [GCEPD], 2003, p. 1). Examining attitudes, behaviors, and labels helps educators to determine what types of changes need to be implemented to serve PETE students best and ensure the development of the finest quality teachers.

Many researchers have examined people’s attitudes and behaviors towards persons with disabilities (Davis & Rizzo, 1991; Jones & Black, 1996; Reber et al., 1995; Rizzo et al., 1997; Sherrill & Yilla, 2004; Smith, 2003; Tait & Purdie, 2000). Behaviors are influenced by attitudes and can be changed (Davis & Rizzo, 1991; Jones & Black, 1996; Reber et al., 1995; Sherrill & Yilla, 2004; Tait & Purdie, 2000). Prior contact and shared experiences with persons with disabilities tend to shape a person’s attitudes and behaviors (Anderson & Antonak, 1992; Barrette et al., 1993; Garske, & Thomas, 1990; Rizzo et al., 1997). Although PETE students often enter an educator licensure program with a variety of experiences and ability levels, increased contact and experience with students with disabilities can help to change any inappropriate dispositions they may have (DePauw & Karp, 1994; Meyer, Govier, Duke, & Advokat, 2001; Rizzo et al., 1997).

When interacting with people with disabilities, teacher candidates may react inappropriately out of fear. For example, in one undergraduate adapted physical education class, many of the students expressed concern over not knowing how to react and interact with persons with disabilities. Students feared that they would not understand how to respond or when to offer assistance. This fear is often due to a lack of knowledge and experience (Smith, 2003). Teaching common points of etiquette can alleviate these concerns and help PETE students to feel more comfortable interacting and working with persons with disabilities.

Labels used to refer to persons with disabilities have a tremendous impact on our attitudes and behaviors (Clark, 2003; Davis & Rizzo, 1991; Norwich, 1999; Rosenblum & Jane, 1998; Sherrill & Yilla, 2004; Smith, 2003). Labels are used for different purposes and can influence our perceptions and judgments (Davis & Rizzo, 1991; Norwich, 1999; Rosenblum & Jane, 1998; Sherrill & Yilla, 2004). This, in turn, may influence a person’s expectations and initial impressions (Davis & Rizzo, 1991; Norwich, 1999; Sherrill & Yilla, 2004). Therefore, teaching the correct and currently acceptable terminology for written and oral communication is a critical first step when including disability etiquette in the curriculum.

## Terminology

It is important to make the distinction between the terms *disability* and *handicapped*. A disability is “a condition caused by accident, trauma, genetics, or disease, which may limit a person’s mobility, hearing, vision, speech or mental functions” (GCEPD, 2003, p. 1). A handicap is defined as “a physical or

attitudinal constraint that has been imposed upon a person regardless of whether that person has a disability” (GCEPD, 2003, p. 1). For example, ramps that are too steep or buildings that are not accessible impose a handicap on persons with disabilities who use wheelchairs (GCEPD, 2003).

Table 1 shows the differences between current terminology and past terminology relative to proper written etiquette. The examples in table 1 are essential to discussions of current acceptable terminology, and a brief explanation of each (GCEPD, 2003) is appropriate.

The term *disability* refers to a limitation and the term *handicapped* is preferably used when referring to laws or offices established by state statutes, such as “Office of Handicapped Concerns” or “handicapped parking.” The term *able-bodied* refers to persons who are not disabled; the term *healthy*, however, implies that a person with a disability is not healthy. Similarly, using of the word *normal* instead of the preferred terminology, “a person who does not have a disability,” implies that persons with disabilities are abnormal. Also, it is better to refer to the person with a disability by the name of the disability by saying, for example, “a person who has autism.” And the use of “restricted (or confined) to a wheelchair” carries a negative connotation that is avoided by “uses a wheelchair.”

## Disability Etiquette and Teaching Strategies

Discussing and demonstrating proper conversational etiquette is a teaching strategy that has been proven highly effective in the author’s experience. Role playing is especially effective for reinforcing proper conversational etiquette. Critiquing role-play activities will create rich and meaningful follow-up discussions that lead to increased awareness and sensitivity for students. Points to be emphasized in demonstrations and role playing include maintaining a relaxed body posture around persons with disabilities; being aware of body language and the messages that may be sent; maintaining eye contact when conversing with a person who has an interpreter; talking to the person with the disability instead of to the interpreter; when acceptable, placing a hand on the shoulder of a person with a hearing impairment, or waiving to gain the person’s attention; being aware that not all persons with a hearing impairment read lips; speaking clearly; and avoiding placing hands in front of one’s mouth (GCEPD, 2003).

Demonstrations, role-playing activities, and discussions could also encompass more specific situations (GCEPD, 2003):

- When speaking with a person in a wheelchair for an extended amount of time, it is best to position oneself at eye level with him or her and to avoid leaning on the wheelchair. The wheelchair is part of his or her personal space, and people generally do not lean on each other during everyday conversations.
- When speaking with a person with a visual impairment, it is helpful to be very specific and descriptive. For example, if moving during the course of the conversation, one should indicate that to the person. One should avoid

Table 1. Changes in Terminology for Disability Etiquette

Current Terminology	Past Terminology
Disability	Handicap
Able-Bodied	Healthy
Persons who do not have a disability	Normal
Person who has (name of disability)	Afflicted or suffers from
Uses a wheelchair	Restricted or confined to a wheelchair

Source: Governor’s Committee on Employment of People with Disabilities (2003)

raising one’s voice or speaking very slowly to a person with a visual impairment.

- Avoid completing the sentences of a person with a speech impairment. It is important to be patient and allow him or her to speak.
- It is acceptable to offer assistance to persons with disabilities, but it should be offered in a dignified and compassionate manner, allowing the person to decline the offer.
- Service animals in general are not considered pets. They are animals that are working. Permission should be asked to pet or feed the animal, because these actions may disrupt the animal’s duties.

To overcome the previously noted “fear factor,” students can learn more about persons with disabilities through assignments that involve collaboration in the community. In this way, students can gain an in-depth understanding of the challenges that people with disabilities face, which may result in students changing their perceptions and attitudes towards them. Giving students more opportunities to experience contact with persons with disabilities, under the guidance of educators with positive attitudes, will increase the chance that they will develop more understanding and insight.

The following, specific teaching strategies can be implemented to address students’ fears in a more consistent manner:

- Offer opportunities for students to express concerns in open, nonjudgmental forums during class time in order to identify specific issues that should be discussed.
- Engage students in class discussions regarding proper written and conversational etiquette to increase their comfort level.
- Have students observe faculty or physical education instructors interact with students with disabilities.
- Videotape classroom situations and role playing as learning tools to help reduce stress.
- Share experiences during group discussions and through journaling to further increase student comfort.

## Infusion of Etiquette in PETE Programs

Infusion of disability etiquette involves the integration of that knowledge throughout the curriculum (DePauw & Karp, 1994; Rizzo et al., 1997). Commonly, information regarding individuals with disabilities is taught in one adapted physical education course and is not necessarily integrated into other courses across the curriculum (Barrette, Fiorentino, & Kowalski, 1993; DePauw & Karp, 1994; Rizzo et al., 1997). But in view of the increased inclusion of persons with disabilities in general physical education classes, as well as the deficiency of adequate behaviors displayed by PETE students, it is becoming more critical for this information to be infused across the curriculum in higher education. For example, disability etiquette could be taught in elementary methods and secondary methods as well as in adapted physical education.

## Summary

There is a decided need to prepare PETE students in ways that reflect changes in society. The attitudes and behaviors of students in the college classroom have changed. Students are not necessarily entering college with adequate social skills. These changes have been substantiated in the professional literature and through the first-hand experiences of the author, and they are reflected in the standards and recommendations from NCATE. In response to the changing needs, the teaching of proper etiquette in various situations needs to be infused across the PETE curriculum. Teaching PETE students proper etiquette toward persons with disabilities will help them to become more sensitive and skillful when addressing persons with disabilities in various situations, both personally and professionally.

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